

Surviving a Layoff

Excerpts from *Starting Over* ©, published by the Center for Working Life.

This is a *survival guide* for laid off workers and their families. Reading this won't get you a new job, but it can make the transition to a new job easier. After a layoff, people find new jobs, get additional training or change careers. The time involved may be a few days, weeks, or many months, and going through the process can be hard. Knowing what can happen when you are laid off can help you avoid some of the problems that other people have faced when they lost their jobs.

We live in a world that is changing, and a lot of that change is happening where we work. Global economy, downsizing, new technology and high performance work organizations are some of the causes for job loss. Change can often be a good thing, but it often starts with a sense of loss.

The change process: When people face changes that they have no control over, they usually go through the four classic stages of the change process: denial, resistance, exploration and commitment. The first reaction to change is always the same, always denial (No, it won't happen. No I can't do it.). Sooner or later we move from denial to resistance (Maybe it will happen, but it won't affect me. Yes, it's a good program, but I don't need it.). When it becomes clear that the change is coming and it's going to affect us, we begin exploring what the changes will mean (If this is going to happen, maybe I'd better check what benefits and services are available for me). The commitment phase is when we start making concrete plans and swinging into action (This is going to happen, tomorrow I'm going to check on retraining).

As long as people stay in the denial and resistance stages, they can't do much to take care of business. These stages are perfectly natural, and you have to go through them. You can't go from denial to commitment without going through resistance and exploration. Good pre-layoff and post-layoff services help people dig into the exploration phase. That's where it's possible to look at the options and start putting together plans to get you where you want to go.

A changing job market: Many years ago, after a period of unemployment, people went back to their old jobs as the economy improved. Now, because of new technology and global economy, sometimes the old jobs aren't there to go back to. The economy has reduced manufacturing jobs and replaced them with jobs in the service and public sectors. New information technologies using computers is a new way of working that will require many to learn new skills to remain competitive. Jobs are also changing because of corporate mergers, downsizing and government cutbacks.

For people who have been in the same job or workplace for a long time, the hiring process was much simpler when they hired on. The job market is much more competitive now, especially for family wage jobs. The whole way of looking for work has changed, and the application process can be much more formal and complicated than it used to be. To find a new job you may have to learn new job search skills. There are usually programs that will help you do that.

Don't blame yourself: Some people believe that somehow it's their fault when they get laid off. Often the decision to down size or close a workplace has nothing to do with the performance of workers or whether it is making money. These decisions are often the result of mergers and a desire to get the highest profits possible. These are things that workers have no control over. Through no fault of their own, the rules of the game have changed, and you aren't to blame for what is happening.

Starting over: Even though the end result of a job transition may be very positive, it involves a lot of changes. One of the hardest changes is starting over. The job that was familiar and seemed secure is gone. It's hard to face going back into a classroom for retraining or starting on a new job. You may have to brush up on skills you haven't used in awhile, or learn to study and take tests again. When you are on a new job, starting over means being a new hire, being on probation, and having the lowest seniority.

Being anxious about starting over is normal, and it's amazing how something as simple as talking about it can make things easier. What feels overwhelming when you face it alone becomes something you *can* do when you are working together with other people to come up with a plan. A "go it alone" attitude makes starting over much harder.

Taking back control: When you lose a job and the security it gave you, you lose some control over your life. Having a plan about what you will do now, and what you will do in the future is a way of taking back some of the control you have lost. The key to taking control is planning. You need a plan for today and one for tomorrow, and you need to act on them. It's important not to just sit back and see what will happen, but to take the initiative. A good plan will help you find all the resources available to help you find a new job, get retraining or build a new career. You may need to upgrade your skills or change careers. A long term plan is the best insurance against a changing and uncertain job market.

Six Stages of the Unemployment Cycle

1. Before the layoff: Before the layoff there may be rumors about when, and if, the layoff will hit. It is a very stressful time. There may be a sharp increase in sickness and accidents both on and off the job. You can take steps now to protect yourself.

2. The layoff: When the layoff happens there is a period of relief, because you are no longer "waiting for the axe to fall". After a while, the reality of what has happened begins to sink in. Relief may be followed by feelings of anger and depression. This is normal, but it's important to stay active and to make progress on your job search or retraining plans so they don't become serious problems.

3. Intensive job search: When the jobs are scarce and there are lots of people competing for every job, it puts people looking for work in a frustrating and difficult situation. It's hard not to lose hope. In this stage, some people withdraw and use more drugs and alcohol. Having a job

search plan and being in a Job Club can help a lot. It's also important to stay in touch with friends and family.

4. Retraining: If retraining is needed to get a new job or to find work in a new field, it can be a difficult time. This may also be a time of less income and can be stressful for the whole family. Make a family plan to support each other in this transition.

5. Running out of benefits: People having troubles finding work may run out of unemployment insurance benefits. When this happens they may become discouraged and stop looking for a job. Other family members may have to find additional work. In this crisis, everyone in the family will need to work hard at holding things together, helping each other and using all available services to get through this stage.

6. Adjusting to a new job: When you find a job, the worst part is over, but there may still be some problems. You now need to get used to the new job, new coworkers, and new rules. Wages may be lower and your seniority will be lost. It may be awhile before the new job is comfortable. Stay in touch with your old coworkers. They are going through the same thing and can give you support.

Layoffs and Loss: When you lose your job, you lose your paycheck. There are lots of other losses that you and your family may experience. Knowing what these losses are can help you deal with them. Some of what you experience are:

- Loss of wages and benefits
- Loss of role as worker and provider
- Loss of dignity and self esteem
- Loss of the "American Dream"
- Loss of trust
- Loss of control over your life
- Loss of the pattern of daily life
- Loss of the work family
- Loss of collective strength

That is a lot for anyone to deal with. The stress of losing a job is like the stress of a death in the family or a divorce. It's not surprising that people sometimes are depressed or angry about losing their jobs. The best way to deal with these losses is to recognize that they are real and painful, and to begin making plans for the future, whether that future means finding a job, retraining, changing careers - or all of the above.

Loss can lead to anger: Faced with losing your job and the uncertainty of what will happen next, it is normal to feel sad, frustrated or angry. If there is no safe place to express what you are feeling it adds to the stress and pressure of the situation, and can cause health and family problems. This can make your job transition, and your life, much more difficult.

Unemployment can make you sick: Unemployment is a health hazard. For every 1% rise in the unemployment rate, the following increases were recorded nationwide:

- 36,887 additional deaths
- 20,240 heart attacks
- 495 alcohol related deaths
- 920 suicides
- 648 homicides
- 4,227 admissions to mental hospitals
- 3,340 state prison admissions

By being aware of what can happen and taking preventative steps, you can reduce these dangers.

Stress symptoms The stress of unemployment shows up in your life. These are some of the symptoms which may apply to you:

- Getting sick more often
- Feeling tired all the time
- Sadness and depression
- Eating more or eating less
- Having more headaches
- Back and stomach problems
- Having trouble sleeping
- Feeling shaky and dizzy
- Sexual problems
- Can't relax without TV
- Not interested in anything
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol
- Getting angry more easily
- Feeling out of control
- Feeling useless and unwanted
- Feeling powerless

Fighting back against stress: If you begin to feel the effects of stress, don't take it lying down. Fight back. You may not be able to remove the causes of stress immediately, but you can do things to make its impact on your life and family smaller. The best way you can combat stress is to take care of your physical and emotional health. It is important to eat healthy food, get adequate rest and stay physically active. There are also relaxation exercises you can do to help alleviate stress.

Join family and friends in a social support network. Don't isolate yourself. Laugh together with people you care about.

You can beat the unemployment blues:

- Have a plan
- Make a schedule
- Keep in touch with friends
- Take care of yourself
- Stay on top of finances - make a financial action plan

Make your job search more effective:

- Spread the word
- Make a schedule
- Expand your job search
- Prepare for job interviews
- Present your experience in the best light
- Be persistent
- Keep in touch with co-workers

Services for laid off workers

One Stop Centers: One Stop Centers are a centralized area where all of the information you will need and as many of the services possible are in one convenient location. Most centers will provide information on unemployment and veterans' benefits, the labor market and prevailing wages, retraining and education opportunities, and on eligibility for other programs and services available in the community. Some centers may also include child care, transportation, career planning, language and math brush-up classes, and a variety of retraining classes.

Job Search Services: Whether you are in a One Stop Center or another agency providing services for laid off workers, you will usually find a full range of job search services. If you are looking for another job immediately, there will be information about available jobs that will include hot lines and lists of employers as well as job boards with job listings and direct referrals. You may also find resume writing workshops and help with interviewing. In many places you will be able to join a Job Club.

Retraining or changing careers: There are several ways to use the services available to you as a laid off worker. You can use the job search services to get back to work as quickly as possible. You can use them to upgrade your skills or get advanced training in your current field. One Stop Centers and other agencies will have information about the training and education programs available in your area. In some cases they will have people who can help you with career planning and they will be able to direct you to local technical schools and colleges who have counselors you can talk to. The hard part may be figuring out what you want to do and what short term sacrifices might be needed.

Other services: Most services have information on programs like food stamps, welfare, food banks, and heating and utility subsidies. No one likes to think about having to use these services, but it can happen.

Filling out applications: Employers look for applications that are complete, easy to read, and filled out correctly. If you really want to get an application advantage:

- Read the whole application and all the instructions before writing.
- Make sure you are on the right line before you write.
- Make sure you have enough space to finish what you are writing.
- Fill in every space. If something doesn't apply to you, write N/A.
- If they ask for skills and qualifications, write out a basic list.
- When answering questions, write a few sentences and then add that there is more detail in your resume.
- Carry both pens and pencils with you to fill out the forms.
- Ask for two copies of the application form. Fill one out in pencil, make a final copy in ink to turn in.
- Make it as easy as possible for the person reading the application to find the information they are looking for.

Making a folder for your job search: Make a job search folder so you'll have all the documents and information you need when you apply for a job. Copy the original documents and keep them in a safe place.

Personal Identification:

- Some form of picture ID
- Social Security number/card
- Military discharge papers
- Proof of current address
- Present phone number
- List of all previous addresses

Education - For vocational schools or colleges list dates attended, major subjects studied, certificates, licenses or degrees. Also include a transcript.

Work Experience - List work experience for the last ten years. Include dates, job titles, salary, supervisor's name and why you left.

- Employers
- Job Skills
- Awards
- Work References

Miscellaneous:

- Interests and hobbies
- Organizations/churches
- Volunteer experience
- Community references
- Future education plans
- Explain any gaps in employment record

Make a job search log:

- Name of organization (address and phone number)
- Information about the organization
- Jobs applied for
- Name of personal contact (title and phone number)
- Date application and resume submitted
- Date of interview (name and title of interviewer)
- Follow up required (what action and when).

Retraining tips: If you haven't been in a classroom for a long time, these are some tips that will make retraining or going back to school easier:

- Have a retraining plan
- Brush up on math and language skills
- Take classes with friends and coworkers
- Use tutoring and counseling services
- Stick to a study schedule
- Study with other people
- If things are unclear in class - ask questions!

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